

OCTOBER IS LGBT MONTH

Aging is never easy, but it may be especially difficult if you are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. It is estimated that there are as many as 2.4 million gay men and lesbians who are 55 and older in America today, a number that will continue to grow rapidly as Baby Boomers age in the years ahead. (Gary Gates, Williams Institute, UCLA) Some live in fear that they need to retreat back into the closet or face disrespect or mistreatment by home care agencies and health care facilities. "Many times gay people avoid seeking help at all because of their fears about how they'll be treated", said David Aronstein, president of Stonewall Communities. "Elderly heterosexuals also suffer the indignities of old age, but not to the same extent", Dr. Melinda Lantz, chief of geriatric psychiatry at Beth Israel Medical Center, NY, said.

Cultural competency training is being provided by Lisa Krinsky, director of the L.G.B.T. Aging Project in Massachusetts, to employees of agencies serving the elderly. "We need to be open and sensitive," Ms. Krinsky said, "but not wrap them in a rainbow flag and make them march in a parade."

Some gay elderly take a direct approach and try to pre-screen the agencies or health care facilities. One organization in Boston is helping gay elders find appropriate support services. "Stonewall Communities, Inc., a non-profit tax-exempt organization, was created to build community for and with LGBT seniors and their friends and to better understand and advocate for their needs.... Its purpose is to keep gay and lesbian seniors safe, active, creative and independent in their own homes and communities." Stonewall Communities can provide both direct services and referrals to pre-screened providers. Outside of Boston, Chelsea Jewish Nursing Home has a new nursing home complex which has a unit devoted to older gay people.